

Butler Street YMCA

Atlanta's Black City Hall Stands Tall Along Auburn Avenue

A set of gray, concrete steps curve up from either side of the building's first story. They meet at a once-grand entryway, its doors now boarded. Carved like shadows into the stonework above the entryway are four long, thin letters: Y M C A.

Near the intersection of Auburn Avenue and what is now Jesse Hill Jr. Drive, not far from the mural of civil rights leader John Lewis, sits the Butler Street branch of the Young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA for short. The Butler Street YMCA building was, for decades, a place of recreation and community in the Sweet Auburn district. But, it also was a place of civic engagement for the Black community in Atlanta. The evolution of the Butler Street YMCA building tells the story of the evolution of the city.



*Five Points, Atlanta, c. 1928
Image via gafollowers.com*

For decades, dating back to the years after the Civil War, Auburn Avenue was a center of Atlanta's Black community. Organizations that would become legends far beyond the city limits – like WERD radio and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – called Auburn Avenue home. Businesses and institutions that served the local Black community – such as the Royal Peacock nightclub and Big Bethel Church – could be found on Auburn Avenue and its surrounding streets.



*Butler Street YMCA
Image via streetsofatlanta*

One of these organizations was the Butler Street YMCA. The Butler Street chapter dates back to 1894, in the waning years of the nineteenth century, when a group of young men met at Wheat Street Baptist Church to finalize the association.

In 1920, a new home for the association was built. Renowned Atlanta architectural firm Hentz, Reid, and Adler - whose work over the years included Peachtree Station and the Rich's downtown flagship store – were commissioned to design the building. The firm created a

10,000 square-foot space at what-was-then 22 Butler Street, just off of Auburn Avenue. Alexander D. Hamilton, a prominent Black builder, was commissioned to make the design a reality. In addition to residences and a building on Morehouse's campus, Hamilton was the builder for the 1922 post-fire re-construction of Big Bethel AME Church.

When completed, the Butler Street YMCA building featured classrooms, a gymnasium, a pool and dozens of dorm rooms. There was a small auditorium, a lunch counter and a game room. Conference rooms and meeting facilities were available for use by local organizations. The Butler Street YMCA offered a clean, safe place for its Black patrons during and after the Jim Crow era.

Over the years, Butler Street’s members included Atlantans who would go on to make their marks in business, politics and the sports world. Future Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson and civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. visited the club. Businessmen and activists Vernon Jordan and Jesse Hill Jr. – the latter the future namesake of Butler Street – were also patrons. And, future professional basketball great Walt “Clyde” Frazier is said to have honed his basketball skills in the gymnasium.



*Atlanta's first 8 Black police officers
Image via Atlantamagazine / Atl. History Ctr.*

But, there was more to the Butler Street YMCA than just recreation. The “Y” played a role in the civic and political life of the city, as well. In April 1948, the Atlanta Police Department’s first eight Black policemen were sworn into service. But, the new officers only technically integrated the Department. When they began their patrols, the Black officers were neither given the use of squad cars nor allowed to patrol white neighborhoods. Until 1962, Black officers were not allowed to arrest white people. And, they were for some time not allowed to use the main police precinct. Instead, the Black officers operated out of the Butler Street YMCA.



*Auburn Ave., Atlanta, c. mid-20th century
Image via wheatsstreettowers.com*

The “Y” also was a major meeting place for the adults of the city. In addition to the police officers, the Butler Street YMCA was home to organizations such as the Atlanta Negro Voters League. It was, in fact, so integral to Black civic life in Atlanta that it came to be known as “Black City Hall.”

In the 1940s, the Butler Street YMCA became the home of the Hungry Club Forum. The Forum offered a chance for Black and White community leaders to gather and discuss the issues of the day. Over the years, the Forum drew speakers familiar in Atlanta, the nation and around the world. Civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and arts figures, like author Langston Hughes, appeared at the Forum. Local and state politicians, including numerous Atlanta mayors also spoke before the Hungry Club.



*Butler Street YMCA
Image via AtlantaHistoryCenter*

Over time, Atlanta changed, and Auburn Avenue changed, as well. Businesses thrived and failed. Organizations came and went. Even the most enduring institutions were not immune to the change. By the early years of the 21st century, the organization was facing financial difficulties. In 2012, 118 years after its founding, the Butler Street YMCA closed the doors of its namesake building. The center that had, for decades, been so significant to Black life in Atlanta was no more. All that was left – and all that remains today – is the aging, abandoned building with those four long, thin letters spelling Y M C A.

** Images are not cleared for use. Author holds no right to images. **